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“You are certain he’s not a man?” – A.I.: *Artificial Intelligence*

As a young person, my gender deviance was insuppressible and a source of perpetual friction with my teachers and peers. One entry from my childhood journal reads: “My art teacher told me I look like some actress from *The Devil Wears Prada*... Anyway, I told her *I* wanted to look like Leonard Nimoy. That threw her for a loop.”

Star Trek was the medium through which I made sense of myself and the world around me. And, my twelve-year-old self’s gender-envy of Nimoy’s Spock paled in comparison to my identification with *Star Trek: The Next Generation*’s gentle golden android, Data. Every night of my lonely adolescence, I fell asleep gazing up at a poster of the android I’d tacked to the ceiling above my bed.

Data is the only artificial life form on the Enterprise, the starship which serves as both his workplace and his community. Data is a liminal figure, conditionally accepted as a person and member of society yet simultaneously always “other,” which often positions him as removed from and critical of binary gender norms. Data’s personhood is frequently interrogated: the artificiality of his body and the perceived inauthenticity of his selfhood are met with derision, fear, litigation and violence. Yet Data’s subjectivity is undeniable despite his otherness. His life, perspective, and interpersonal relationships are portrayed as meaningful and worthy.

At that point in my young life, I had never met a trans person (that I knew of!). I wouldn’t have dared to dream that one day I would grow up to be something like a man. And more, that I would love and be loved by a community of others like me and unlike me, co-conspirators of queerness and gender radicals united by our shared resistance to the tyranny of static, essential binary gender.

And yet I did dream of a future. What I understood as the defining parameters for humanity necessarily excluded me. So I sought to map myself, and the worthiness of my continued existence, onto the non-human other. I felt—and still feel—a powerful affiliation with the android and the alien, subjects who are “other” to “human” perspectives and embodiments. “Humanity” in these texts is too often constructed in the image of the norm—space colonizers and cowboys, able

bodied, defined by whiteness and an essentialist understanding of gender. But nonhuman can be anything.

As Trans people innovate language in order to communicate our realities and experiences, Sci fi imagery can be found in the stories we tell about ourselves, the language we use to communicate our needs, and how we painstakingly speak our bodies into being. Some Trans writers and scholars defiantly embrace the artifice of self-creation, the “medically constructed” nature of Trans bodies, and the radical potential of the nonhuman and monstrous. One foundational work of Trans studies, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix” explores these themes in relation to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, which some consider to be the first science fiction novel. Stryker writes, “The transsexual body is an unnatural body. It is the product of medical science. It is a technological construction,” and Stryker characterizes this unnaturalness as a source of pride and agency: reveling in her counternormativity and the self-possessed power of her own voice (238).

We are in the business of creating futures, by necessity: we live in a world that denies and rejects our existence, that polices our bodies and our expression, that mounts enormous material obstacles to our survival. The knowledge cultivated through the lived experience of Transness and transition equips Trans people with the tools of future-making, regardless of whether we’ve read any Trans Studies. Philosopher Merleau-Ponty characterized Phenomenology as a philosophy that “can be practiced and identified as a manner or style of thinking, that it existed as a movement before arriving at complete awareness of itself as a philosophy” (Merleau-Ponty viii). Just as the phenomenological style of thinking can be practiced regardless of formal knowledge of phenomenology, Trans people are imagining Trans futures into being simply by living their lives. Instead of fixed and essential, we may understand gender as a fundamentally relational practice, as both self-creating and self-defining: by enacting my gender, I am my gender; as I am my gender, so I enact it. But cis people can learn to practice this style of thinking as well—and must.

It is imperative that those of us in medical fields learn to imagine Trans futures, because the limits of the cis imagination have material ramifications for Trans people. Medical gatekeeping, the policing of Trans and gender-nonconforming bodies, and the coercive demand for particular narratives or gender performances from Trans patients remain significant barriers to care. As I wrote in my essay for *The Lancet*, “Beyond Trans Competency: Imagining a Trans Liberatory Future,” “... narratives are a currency of authenticity, [demanded as] proof that Trans people ‘deserve’ access to gender-affirming medical care and resources. Since dysphoria is an internal, subjective experience, ‘proving’ it involves disclosing intimate and painful information to unfamiliar professionals who may or may not have any training in or familiarity with gender dysphoria, but who have the power to grant or deny crucial transition care” (Rodman & DasGupta 1). And, as studies continue to show, Trans people suffer from high rates of preventable illness due to medical discrimination, alienation in the clinical encounter, and lack of affordable, Trans-inclusive health resources.

In her 2020 essay “Visionary Medicine,” published in *The Routledge Companion to Health Humanities*, Sayantani DasGupta writes, “Medicine cannot imagine more racially just futures until it grapples

honestly with its racially unjust past and present: its complicity in, dependence on, and enacting of racial violence” (34). One component of this violence is medicine’s continued policing of and reliance on binary gender and sex as essential and immutable taxonomies. DasGupta characterizes speculative fiction as one way for medicine to “imagine a more racially just future—a future invested in the health and well-being of all people” (36). Speculative fiction, with its androids, aliens, cyborgs and mutants, can be a pedagogical tool for expanding the range of possible human truths. It can grant readers an opportunity to empathize with and think as characters who exist in defiance to normative imperatives of communication, embodiment, expression, and self.

Speculative fiction that explores the infinite potentiality of gender and embodiment can help the reader conceptualize worlds in which “man” and “woman” are not static and essential categories; they may be irrelevant categories altogether. Walidah Imarisha, co-editor of *Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements* writes of “visionary fiction,” a practice “defined by its insistence on imagining freer and more liberated worlds or critiquing injustice, rather than uncritically recreating the power structures of the world as we know it in fantastical garb” (Imarisha). This means moving beyond mapping Trans experiences onto cis characters and stories, and seeking out the narratives of futurity being created by Trans writers such as Nino Cipri, Charlie Jane Anders, Julian K. Jarboe and many more.

Walidah Imarisha writes of both the activist potential of speculative fiction and of activism itself as an exercise in speculative fiction: “When we talk about a world without prisons; a world without police violence; a world where everyone has food, clothing, shelter, quality education; a world free of white supremacy, patriarchy, capitalism, heterosexism; we are talking about a world that doesn’t currently exist. But collectively dreaming up one that does means we can begin building it into existence.” Transgender and nonbinary people are imagining—and creating—radical Trans futures simply by living their lives. Our continued existence in defiance of the structures that operate to erase and police us, we imagine ourselves into being, and we enlist science and technology in service of our self-creation. A future of abundance and safety is out of reach for most Trans people, and yet, we have to imagine it to survive, we have to hope for a future in which we are able to have what we need.

When I imagined my future as a young teen, I yearned for menopause—or even illness—to stop my periods, not realizing that I could simply start taking testosterone. When I learned about hormone replacement therapy and other mechanisms with which to suppress menstruation, it created in me a capacity to imagine a completely different future, one in which I could be a happy and confident young person. For some time in my transition, this body—the body I live in now—was an imagined future. It was speculative fiction.

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Gendered Minority” was presented at the 2020 Popular Culture Association Conference. Reach out to him at [glenkallioperodman\[at\]gmail.com](mailto:glenkallioperodman@gmail.com) if you’d like to correspond or collaborate!

Image Source: The NASA/ESA Hubble Space Telescope has peered deep into NGC 4631, better known as the Whale Galaxy. WikiCommons.

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